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RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 9200
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000226

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)
SUBJECT: HOW TO GET AN ALGERIAN TO VOTE IN APRIL

REF: A. ALGIERS 147
[1](#)B. 08 ALGIERS 1220
[1](#)C. ALGIERS 176

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Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b and d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Achieving a respectable level of voter turnout for the April election appears to be the key government concern for legitimizing the presidential electoral process and delivering Bouteflika a landslide victory. Voter turnout has been in steady decline in recent years as Algerians have become less and less interested in the country's stagnant political system. Unofficial turnout levels were well below 20 percent in 2007 parliamentary and local elections, even among demographics with historically high participation rates. In response, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) has established a special cell responsible for coordinating a sophisticated campaign aimed at enticing Algerians to the polls. Since January, government officials have canvassed Algerian households to update voter registries and encourage unregistered voters to sign up. The MOI also launched a nationwide public awareness campaign in television and print media; Algeria's top three cellular service providers have placed their networks at the disposal of the campaign, and the religious affairs minister has instructed imams to encourage their congregations to vote, arguing that abstention would be contrary to Islamic values. Meanwhile, mobile teams of student activists have spread across universities to encourage their peers to vote and recommend whom they should vote for. FLN leader Abdelaziz Belkhadem suggested in a February television interview that 65 percent would represent a "healthy" turnout for April. More recently, he said that 85 percent turnout was feasible. The government's massive effort to guarantee voter turnout demonstrates that nothing is being left to chance, and is another example of the vast administrative resources the government is willing to marshal to deliver the result it wants. END SUMMARY.

PLEASE, JUST VOTE

[1](#)2. (C) With administrative preparations for the April 9 presidential election well underway, Algeria's political establishment must now face its most difficult challenge: convincing Algerians to vote. Voter turnout has been in steady decline in recent years as more and more Algerians have become frustrated with or apathetic about Algeria's stagnant political system (ref A). Professor Ali Mabroukine told us in January that the government is keenly aware of Algerians' declining interest in politics and that voter

turnout is a key concern for April: In 2007, he asserted, "less than 20 percent of registered voters participated." Mabroukine emphasized that low turnout was not just a phenomenon in Algeria's metropolitan centers, but that rural voters -- a demographic with historically high rates of voter turnout -- also chose not to participate.

13. (C) By April, Algerian officials need to overcome voter apathy and produce a large enough number of voters to satisfy Bouteflika's goal, stated during his February 12 campaign announcement, of being re-elected "by an overwhelming majority of the people." The president's campaign handlers announced February 23 that they collected four million signatures from registered voters to re-elect Bouteflika, dwarfing the 140,000 signatures the number-two candidate, Louisa Hanoune, submitted to the Constitutional Council in support of her candidacy. FLN leader Abdelaziz Belkhadem said in a television interview late February that a 65-percent voter turnout would reflect a level of participation "as high or higher than that seen in most Western countries." On March 3, he boasted that 85 percent turnout was realistic. Taking its cue, the government is pulling out all the stops in a sophisticated get-out-the-vote effort that is leveraging government resources, businesses, universities and mosques in a bid to bring Algerians to the polls on April 9 and deliver Bouteflika an expected landslide victory.

WE HAVE A BATTLE PLAN

14. (C) A mid-level MOI contact told us that for the first time the ministry has established a special cell responsible for elaborating a "battle plan" for the election. The

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overall focus of the strategy centers on increasing turnout and public interest, with a particular emphasis on boosting the number of registered voters and the participation of young Algerians. The MOI has taken a multifaceted approach that has included a comprehensive review of voter registries, administrative efforts to make registering to vote easier, and a nation-wide public awareness campaign.

15. (C) An MOI media campaign has used posters and placed television and radio announcements urging Algerians to "exercise their right and duty" to vote and promising to make registering and voting more convenient. The ministry and local governments have dispatched a small army of officials - often young female volunteers - in a door-to-door campaign to encourage Algerians to vote and update their registration information on the spot. Many of our LES staff reported conversations with local community officials who came to their homes promising expedited registration. Local town halls have extended their work hours to every day of the week except Fridays to process applications. Private businesses have answered the MOI's call as well. Algeria's three major mobile phone operators sent blanket SMS messages over their networks in February encouraging subscribers to register and vote. In mid-February, Religious Affairs Minister Bouabdallah Ghlamallah took the extraordinary step of instructing imams to encourage their congregations to turnout in April. Justifying the role of mosques for this purpose the minister said, "Calls to abstain from participating in the election do not conform to the values of Islam." A recent headline in the government-owned daily El Moudjahed announced the support of the usually apolitical Sufi zaouias for Bouteflika's reelection as well (ref B).

16. (C) The MOI announced that from February 10-19 it conducted an "exceptional revision of voting lists," estimating that there were 18 million registered voters in Algeria. On March 1, Zerhouni told the press that the number of registered voters had passed 20 million. Explaining the increase, Zerhouni touted the government's efforts to ensure the participation of an estimated 1.3 million Algerians

living abroad and 300,000 newly registered voters in Algeria.

But the reality of whether the government's efforts have truly captured the public's interest is difficult to measure.

One staff member told us that when he went to register he was told to go home and wait for his application in the mail: "If you don't hear from us by March 20, come back and let us know."

THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

17. (C) Keen to make voting easier for university students, the MOI issued a new rule on February 28 allowing students to choose between voting in the district of their permanent residence or in the district where they attend school. FLN activist Riad Anane told us "when 70 percent of the population is made up of young people under 30, it's normal to make this portion of the population a priority." But opposition RCD activist Linda Messous called the "sudden" interest in youth "cynical" and driven only by the fact that this is an election year. In the meantime, mobile teams of youth caravans and university activists have fanned out across Algeria and university campuses in an effort to encourage their peers to vote in April. Lofti Boukaddoum, a student activist at the Algiers School of Commerce, told us his mission was to approach students from his school and those at the faculty of law in the Ben Aknoun neighborhood of Algiers. "We never mention the name of Bouteflika during the first approach," he explained. "We are asked first to explain to students the duty of voting, then by the third meeting we imply who students should vote for." Asked about the fairness of such methods, Lofti scoffed, "do you see another suitable president for Algeria? We don't!"

NOTHING LEFT TO CHANCE

18. (C) FLN activist Najib Stambouli told us that "if you follow politics here, you know that Belkhadem's words aren't innocent; if he talked about a 60-percent turnout, it is an instruction that all means possible are to be used to achieve that 60 percent." Journalist Fatima Arab reminded us that the government's organizational resources extend even further than influential players like the MOI. The president's coalition will also work hand-in-hand with "official" civil

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society organizations like the General Union of Algerian Workers. "So get ready for 70-percent turnout," she said. The government's massive effort to guarantee voter turnout demonstrates that nothing is being left to chance, and is another example of the vast administrative resources the government is willing to marshal to achieve the result it wants (ref C). With so much official involvement at almost every level in society, intimidation is another factor that may bolster turnout results. A contact at MOI said plainclothes policewomen often accompanied local officials who went door-to-door updating voter registries. "Anyone who changed their address can now be spotted," she said. "And old habits are hard to break: the fact that the local council has you on a list means you will definitely go and vote."

PEARCE